

The Oregonian

FOREST LEGISLATION

Sunday, November 06, 2005

DAVID REINHARD

The Oregonian

Democrat understands the perils of 'psychic environmentalism'

Rep. Brian Baird has now come to understand the special power of environmentalists.

No, the Washington state Democrat is not cowering before them. He remains committed to co-sponsoring the Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act with Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore. But Baird has come face to face with green power.

Environmentalists who talked to him knew just what they didn't like about this bill. It waives environmental laws on the federal lands. It keeps the public out of the land-management decisions. It paves the way for roads in "roadless areas." It clears the way for massive clear-cuts and tree plantations on restored lands.

There was one problem with the greenies' gripes. Walden and Baird hadn't introduced the bill yet. Make that two problems: The stuff they opposed was not in the un-introduced bill. Baird calls it "psychic environmentalism."

Beautiful. It's bad enough that environmentalists too often don't seem interested in offering solutions to the problems of our federal lands -- say, the problem of dead and dying forests prone to catastrophic wildfires prior to the Healthy Forests Restoration Act -- but now they're opposing phantom legislation.

What fails to happen on federal lands after a natural disaster is no phantom problem. A tornado, windstorm, insect epidemic or wildfire decimates the land, and failing to move quickly to log dead and dying trees and to replant costs us all economically and environmentally.

Procedural delays -- extended administrative appeals and lawsuits -- lead to the deterioration of the trees and the reduction in the value of the wood. If the delay goes on too long, the trees aren't worth bidding on. Result: Vast tracts go unrestored.

A two-year delay after the 2001 Gap fire in the Tahoe National Forest resulted in a \$1.35 million loss in the value. That money might have helped watershed restoration, resource enhancement and the removal of trees that could fuel the next inferno.

Walden points out that an estimated 20 billion board feet of timber are on the ground after Hurricane Katrina. That's enough to build 800,000 homes or produce 25 million tons of paper. Much of this timber will be harvested because it's on private land, but federal land managers cannot act in a timely manner. After one fire, Colville tribal members were salvaging still-smoldering logs. The Forest Service, by contrast, did almost no salvage.

Baird says he finds psychic environmentalism "hysterically funny," but "disappointing," as well. His message to environmentalists who were roughing him up before they had seen the un-introduced: "Read what's in the bill."

If they bothered they would find a measured, common-sense approach to restoring devastated federal lands. It would allow interdisciplinary teams to quickly develop restoration plans for areas of more than 1,000 acres. Salvage logging and reforestation plans would have to be completed in 120 days and could be appealed at the administrative level and in the courts, under the same guidelines as in the bipartisan-backed Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003.

What they would not find is the phantom features of their phantom bill. The bill does not supplant approved forest plans. Any recovery project must comply with approved forest plans.

It does not promote clear-cuts. Only dead, down, dying or broken trees or trees posing a hazard could be logged. It does not promote plantation forests. It requires reforestation with native species and promotes biodiversity. It does not allow permanent logging roads in roadless areas.

It does not lock the public out of the administrative process or courts. Interested parties can provide information during the process and, if they're unsuccessful there, continue to object in court.

As Baird says, "It's a pretty reasonable solution." That is, unless your problem is allowing anyone into these scarred federal lands. If so, he has a question for you: "They say don't kill the dead trees and don't kill the live trees. Goodness sakes, where do we get the wood?"

Well, at least we now know what's in -- and not in -- the bill. We can argue about real rather than imagined things. Unless the greens want to try their hand at "Don Quixote" environmentalism -- tilting at (eco-friendly) windmills.

David Reinhard, associate editor, can be reached at 503-221-8152 or davidreinhard@news.oregonian.com.